RHETORIC DIACHRONICALLY VIEWED

Silviu Nicolae Pîrîială
PhD Student, "Ştefan cel Mare" University of Suceava

Abstract: This paper examines the historical development of rhetoric from Antiquity to the 21st century. The ability to speak or write with eloquence and wisdom has been highly praised since Ancient Egypt, but it wasn't until the rise of Greek democracy that rhetoric became a high art that was studied and developed systematically. Along with democracy, philosophy, the ability to speak well was one of the most important values of the Greeks. Learning the art of rhetoric was a noble pursuit and it was considered an essential element of a distinctive education. Throughout the centuries, the discipline of rhetoric was adapted to the specific requirements of Greek, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment and contemporary societies.

Keywords: rhetoric, definition, communication, persuasion, evolution

The history of rhetoric is undoubtedly related to the history of mankind. Language has contributed to the organization and development of societies by shaping meanings and identities, producing change, mediating power and creating knowledge. The diversity of definitions given to rhetoric as an art of public speaking reflects not only its evolution, but also its complexity, specificity, its multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary character. In Ancient Greece, Aristotle saw rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion"[1], while in Rome Quintilian regarded it as " the art of the good citizen speaking well"[2]. In the Middle Ages, St. Augustine considered rhetoric "the means of discovering what the thought may be, and the means of expressing what the thought is".[3] In Renaissance, Erasmus believed that "Elegance depends partly on the use of words established in suitable authors, partly on their right application, partly on their right combination in phrases.…style is to thought as clothes are to the body. Just as dress and outward appearance can enhance or disfigure the beauty and dignity of the body, so words can enhance or disfigure thought"[4], while during Enlightenment Blair viewed rhetoric as "the art of speaking in such a manner as to attain the end for which we speak. […] the art of persuasion"[5]. In the modern and contemporary era, Burke defines rhetoric as a "the energy inherent in emotion and thought, transmitted through a system of signs, including language, to others to influence their decisions or actions"[6], while Jacques Derrida considered that "the effects of rhetoric don't depend only on the way you utter words, the way you use tropes, the way you compose. They depend on certain situations".[7]The appearance and the continuous development of mass media during the 20th and 21st century produced a notable change in the study of rhetoric.

[1] Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present,* Bedford, Boston, 1990, p. 160
[2] James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction, 2nd Edition*, Allyn & Bacon, 2000, p.107
[3] Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, p.386
[4] Idem, p.508
[5] Idem, p.818
[6] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives,* University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969, p.43
[7] James A. Herrick, p.254

BDD-A28621 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:47:16 UTC)

Images and films have become powerful tools of persuasion, so besides written and spoken word, visual arts have been included into the body of research.

The word rhetoric is derived from the Greek "rhetorike" which means the civic art of public speaking[8]. It was an essential element for the public, political and legal life of the citizens of the Greek city-states because a man's success and influence depended on his rhetorical ability.

The origins of rhetoric or of those ideas about discourse that became the Greek study of rhetoric are difficult to be established. "Rhetoric did not originate at a single moment in history. Rather; it was an evolving, developing consciousness about the relationship between thought and expression."[9]

The beginning points of the systematic study of oratory could be correlated to the rising of democracies of Syracuse and Athens in the fifth century B.C. Corax and his student, Tisias, are associated with the formal study of rhetoric. Corax offered training in judicial pleading and he is believed to have had a role in establishing democratic reforms in Syracuse. Corax is considered to have been the first to write a handbook on the art of rhetoric, dealing with such topics as arguments from probability and the rules for the subdivision of speeches. But no texts survived from this period; their work is present only in fragments quoted by other writers, while their views can be found in the writings of their opponents. Their approach towards teaching oratory was adopted and carried to the Greek city-states by teachers and practitioners of rhetoric known as Sophists.

Rhetoric's success in Ancient Greece was the effect of the important changes that took place in several Greek city-states: from aristocracy to democracy. On such background, Sophists offered training in inventing arguments and presenting them in a convincing manner to a larger audience. They were teachers, advocates, professional orators who accepted fees in return for instruction in rhetoric, emphasizing upon its practical application toward civic and political life. They didn't only teach the art of verbal persuasion, but they also offered a complete intellectual training and claimed that they could be able to teach the secrets of success. Their belief was that virtue could be taught as opposed to the aristocratic view that excellence was inherited or even given by the Gods. In their teaching of rhetoric, they employed the dialectical method: inventing arguments for and against a statement. They also asked their students to memorize famous speeches, those composed by the teacher or by themselves, a method known as "epideixis" denoting a speech prepared for a special occasion.[10]

The most famous of the Sophists were Gorgias, Protagoras and Isocrates. Gorgias was aware of the great power that words can exercises over the human mind and considered that a skilled rhetorician can prove any proposition. He is best known in the history of rhetoric for developing stylistic devices that were later expanded by many subsequent orators and rhetorical theorists. He focused on style and linguistic ornament, important aspects throughout the historical evolution of rhetoric. Protagoras is considered to be the first Greek sophist and he is credited with the philosophy of relativism. He argued that on any issue, there are two arguments opposed to one another, the resolution depending on the clash of the pros and cons. For him, an argument would win only after it was tested by and resisted the attacks of the opposing side.[11] Isocrates founded the first of the rhetorical schools in Athens which focused on rhetorical rules, practice and the use of examples. He oriented his rhetorical teaching on three factors: natural talent, extensive practice, and education in basic principles

[8] George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, Princeton University Press, 1994, p.3
[9] Richard Leo Enos as cited in James A. Herrick, p.31
[10] James A. Herrick, p.36
[11] Idem, p.42

BDD-A28621 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:47:16 UTC)

of rhetoric. He considered that rhetoric made the human civilization itself possible.[12] He regarded rhetoric as a tool that empowered his educational system to promote his ideal of a united Greece.

The Sophists focused on style and presentation even at the expense of truth. Their ability to persuade with clever arguments and stylistic techniques, their teaching in exchange for money, their roots outside the Greek world led many Greeks to see them as a dangerous element in their society. The term gained a negative connotation: a "sophist" was a man who manipulated the truth for financial gain. But despite criticism from their contemporaries, the Sophists had a huge influence on developing the study and teaching of rhetoric.

The most notable Sophist critics were Plato and Aristotle. They condemned Sophists for relying only on emotion in order to persuade an audience and for their disregard for the truth.[13] Plato criticized the Sophist practice of rhetoric in his dialogues entitled *Gorgias* and *Sophist and Protagoras*; he also suggested the possibility of a true rhetoric in *Phaedrus*. In *Gorgias*, he claims that the rhetoric practiced by the Sophists does not show an adequate view of justice, of truth, therefore becoming dangerous for both the individual and the society. According to him, this kind of rhetoric aimed only at persuasion about justice through the manipulation of the public opinion; he believed that true justice must be grounded in true knowledge and aim at the well being of the individual and of the state. Plato was also a critic of the fact that Sophists dismissed objective knowledge, looking instead for relative knowledge as being the only one possible. Plato believed in a higher realm, with perfect entities and he rejected the Sophists' view that this imperfect world was the only reality. In Phaedrus, Plato considers that a true art of persuasive speech must aim at bringing order in a society and this can be achieved through the study of the human soul, of the different kinds of people and of the power of the words. Rhetoric must be founded on the love of wisdom and the knowledge of justice.

Following the footsteps of his teacher, Aristotle considered that the Sophist was a person who made money from an apparent, but unreal wisdom. He criticized the Sophists for the misuse of rhetoric, but he found it useful in helping audiences see and understand the truth. His most known work, *The Art of Rhetoric*, had a vital influence on the development of the study of rhetoric for the next 2,000 years. Dividing his treatise into three books, Aristotle established a system of understanding and teaching rhetoric: three means of persuasion (logos, pathos, and ethos); three genres of rhetoric (deliberative, forensic, and epideictic); rhetorical topics; parts of speech; effective use of style. In the first book, he establishes and defines the field of rhetoric and also describes the three types of oratory: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. The second book discusses rhetorical proofs derived from character and emotion, while the third one presents matters of style and arrangement. In Aristotle's view, not everyone was able to follow formal logic. Therefore, when attempting to persuade people, concepts that are available to everyone must be used. The capacity to make contradictory cases was needed so that one could recognize and refute unjust arguments.[14] Rhetoric offered the necessary tools to recognize demagogues and those who used rhetoric for evil purposes. He also distinguished between three genres of rhetoric according to the nature of the audience: if the audience is judging events that happened in the past, than the speech is judicial- forensic or courtroom rhetoric; if the audience is being asked to judge what actions must be taken in the future, the speech is deliberative- deliberative rhetoric; if the audience is not being asked to take a specific action, than the speech is demonstrative- epideictic rhetoric. These three categories remained fundamental throughout

[12] Idem, p.44
[13] Richard Toye, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction*, 1st Edition, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 26
[14] Idem, p.25

BDD-A28621 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:47:16 UTC)

the history of classical rhetoric and are still useful in classifying forms of discourse today. Aristotle identified three means of persuasion or artistic proofs: logical reasoning (logos), the names and causes of various human emotions (pathos) and human character and goodness (ethos).[15] Each of them could be employed in any of the three rhetorical genres. Considering the style of a speech, Aristotle believed that above all, clarity is the most important feature and in order to deliver the message in an effective way, every speech must be adapted to the occasion. Aristotle's treatise remains a remarkable effort to deal systematically with rhetoric and one of the most insightful ever written.

The major themes of Greek rhetoric continued to play an important role in the thinking of rhetorical theorists; in Rome, the ability to speak and write clearly and persuasively, represented the most practical and powerful tool that prepared citizens for personal success and advancement. "Roman rhetoric is best viewed as part of a larger cultural process, that is, not just as a system of rules applicable to spoken and written language, but as a fundamental component in the exploration of Roman society and literature."[16] Many of the rhetorical elements established by the Greeks were incorporated in Roman thinking and acting. But, unlike their Greek counterparts that focused on logical reasoning, orators and writers in Rome depended more on stylistic flourishes, captivating stories and fascinating metaphors. The most important Roman rhetoricians were Cicero, the greatest orator and theorist and Quintilian, the most successful and known teacher of rhetoric.

Cicero's view upon rhetoric emphasized the importance of a liberal education. In order to be a persuasive orator, a man needed knowledge in history, politics, art, literature, ethics, law, and medicine. In this way, a man would be able to connect with any kind of audience he addressed, a key component in the rhetoric of Rome. He wrote several treatises concerning rhetoric, the best known being *De Inventione*, *De Oratore*. In *De Inventione*, Cicero presents his five canons of rhetoric: *inventio* (invention)- developing and refining arguments; *dispositio* (arrangement)- arranging and organizing arguments for achieving maximum impact; *elocutio* (expression)- determining how to present arguments using figures of speech and other rhetorical techniques; *memoria* (memory)- learning and memorizing a speech in order to deliver it without the use of notes; *pronuntiatio* (delivery)- practicing the deliverance of a speech using gestures, pronunciation and tone of voice.

Quintilian considered that a good orator must be a culturally conservative Roman citizen and an honorable person. His impressive work, *Institutio Oratoria*, represents a complete guide to achieving excellence as a public speaker. The treatise covers all aspects of the art of rhetoric. Quintilian focuses primarily on the technical aspects of effective rhetoric, but he also tries to draw a curriculum that could serve as the foundation of every man's education. In his public school of rhetoric, he developed a study system that took a student through different stages of intense rhetorical training.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, rhetoric was adapted to the needs of the Christian society between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. During the Middle Ages, rhetoric became identified with the written style and was used to assist the oral exposition of biblical texts.[17] The influence of Greek and Roman rhetoric can be found in early Christian writings, including the Bible. Rhetoric was regarded as a means to save souls. God was the source of truth in the Christian system and church fathers, like St. Augustine, explored the way the art of rhetoric could be used in order to better spread the gospel to the unconverted and preach to the believers. "Schools of rhetoric continued to exist, more in the East than in the West, but they were fewer and were only partially replaced by study of rhetoric in some monasteries.

[15] James A. Herrick, p.82
[16] Gualtiero Calboli, William J. Dominik as cited in Richard Toye, p.27
[17] James A. Herrick, p.123

BDD-A28621 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:47:16 UTC)

The acceptance of classical rhetoric by such influential Christians as Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine in the fourth century significantly contributed to continuation of the tradition, though the functions of the study of rhetoric in the Church were transferred from preparation for public address in law courts and assemblies to knowledge useful in interpreting the Bible, in preaching, and in ecclesiastical disputation."[18] During the Middle Ages, two of the most influential works from the classical period were Cicero's *De Inventione* and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Cicero's *De Oratore* weren't rediscovered by scholars until late in the medieval period.

The study of rhetoric was revitalized during the Renaissance and Enlightenment period. Texts by Cicero and Quintilian were rediscovered and utilized in courses of study; for example, Quintilian's *De Inventione* quickly became a standard rhetoric textbook in European universities. Rhetoric flourished as a method of instruction in writing and persuasion, becoming a reflection of personal refinement, a means of managing the civic and commercial interests and a critical tool for studying a variety of literary texts, both ancient and contemporary.[19] Rhetoric was the language of education and the educated during this period. The Italian Humanist school regarded rhetoric as a way of self improvement and social development, the art of oratory dominating the thoughts of all intellectuals and the curriculum of universities. Francesco Petrarca, the founder of Italian Humanism, revived interest in classical, especially Ciceronian, rhetoric, with an emphasis on its persuasive power. He believed that rhetoric was at the center of Rome's greatness and this could be achieved if young people were educated in wisdom and eloquence. Lorenzo Valla considered that having a command of language means having a certain power over reality; things become accessible by means of the word which unlocks the world for a man. Pico della Mirandola stated that humans employ language to order the world, and to work cooperatively within it; the power to choose and thus to create civilization is a direct consequence of linguistic capacity. Toward the end of the Renaissance, Peter Ramus relegated rhetoric to the study of style and delivery. The rejuvenation of rhetoric continued through the Enlightenment. The eighteenth century marked a period in which rhetorical theory turned away from its traditional concern for the invention of arguments toward aesthetic matters of style and good delivery. One of the most influential books on rhetoric that came out during this time was Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric* and *Belles-Lettres*. Published in 1783, Blair's book remained a standard text on rhetoric at universities across Europe and America for over a hundred years.

The twentieth century was marked by the emergence of the New Rhetoric. Through the magnitude of the observations, the precision of the definitions and the rigor of the classifications, rhetoric becomes more than a set of rules; it is constituted as a systematic study of the resources of the language.

The New Rhetoric is subsumed - in an interdisciplinary context - to the common reflection of philosophers, linguists, communication analysts; the speaker will have a main role in building the meaning of the discourse. The general interest in linguistics led to a re-evaluation of the role of rhetoric. The revitalization of rhetoric is marked by the existence of two fundamental directions: the macro rhetoric, centered on *inventio* as highlighted by the works of C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (*Traite d'argumentation - La nouvelle rhetorique*), aiming at re-interpreting Aristotelian theory of argumentation in a world governed by the imperative of communication; micro rhetoric or the theory of the figures of speech. The former is focused on the coordinates of the social discourse, the dominant concept being the argumentative scheme, while the later gives a special attention to the study

[18]George A. Kennedy, p.258
[19] James A. Herrick, p.145

BDD-A28621 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:47:16 UTC)

of *elocutio*, the dominant concept being the figure of speech, highlighting its linguistic meaning and the pragmatic conditions of its use, within different discursive genres.

The New Rhetoric emphasizes on the role of information in the communication process, in which the meaning of the discourse is built as a result of the interaction: author / lecturer, speaker / auditor. The New Rhetoric is no longer the art of elegant speech, but the theory of persuasive communication, argumentation being an essential component of the discursive act. The discursive practice aims at persuading a certain audience with a concise and pragmatic discourse.

The study of rhetoric facilitates the understanding of the functions that various types of discourse have, the critical reading of texts, the practice of various speeches in multiple communication situations. By exploring its interdisciplinary valences, rhetoric has become an important topic of study in recent years and its significance to public discussion of important political, social and even scientific problems has been widely recognized.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIZZELL, Patricia, HERZBERG, Bruce, 1990, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, Bedford, Boston

BURKE, Kenneth, 1969, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles

HERRICK, James A., 2000, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction, 2nd Edition*, Allyn & Bacon

KENNEDY, George A., 1994, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, Princeton University Press

RICHARDS, Jennifer, 2008, *Rhetoric*, Routledge

TOYE, Richard, 2013, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction, 1st Edition*, Richard Toye, Oxford University Press

BDD-A28621 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:47:16 UTC)